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Make the Fault Seem Easy to Correct

A BACHELOR FRIEND OF MINE, ABOUT FORTY YEARS OLD, BECAME engaged, and his fiancée persuaded him to take some belated dancing lessons. "The Lord knows I needed dancing lessons," he confessed as he told me the story, "for I danced just as I did when I first started twenty years ago. The first teacher I engaged probably told me the truth. She said I was all wrong; I would just have to forget everything and begin all over again. But that took the heart out of me. I had no incentive to go on. So I quit her.

"The next teacher may have been lying, but I liked it. She said nonchalantly that my dancing was a bit old-fashioned perhaps, but the fundamentals were all right, and she assured me I wouldn't have any trouble learning a few new steps. The first teacher had discouraged me by emphasizing my mistakes. This new teacher did the opposite. She kept praising the things I did right and minimizing my errors. 'You have a natural sense of rhythm,' she assured me. 'You really are a natural-born dancer.' Now my common sense tells me that I always have been and always will be a fourth-rate dancer; yet, deep in my heart, I still like to think that

maybe she meant it. To be sure, I was paying her to say it; but why bring that up?

"At any rate, I know I am a better dancer than I would have been if she hadn't told me I had a natural sense of rhythm. That encouraged me. That gave me hope. That made me want to improve."

Tell your child, your spouse, or your employee that he or she is stupid or dumb at a certain thing, has no gift for it, and is doing it all wrong, and you have destroyed almost every incentive to try to improve. But use the opposite technique—be liberal with your encouragement, make the thing seem easy to do, let the other person know that you have faith in his ability to do it, that he has an undeveloped flair for it—and he will practice until the dawn comes in the window in order to excel.

Lowell Thomas, a superb artist in human relations, used this technique. He gave you confidence, inspired you with courage and faith. For example, I spent a weekend with Mr. and Mrs. Thomas; and on Saturday night, I was asked to sit in on a friendly bridge game before a roaring fire. Bridge? Oh, no! No! No! Not me. I knew nothing about it. The game had always been a black mystery to me. No! No! Impossible!

"Why, Dale, it is no trick at all," Lowell replied. "There is nothing to bridge except memory and judgment. You've written articles on memory. Bridge will be a cinch for you. It's right up your alley."

And presto, almost before I realized what I was doing, I found myself for the first time at a bridge table. All because I was told I had a natural flair for it and the game was made to seem easy.

Speaking of bridge reminds me of Ely Culbertson, whose books on bridge have been translated into a dozen languages and have sold more than a million copies. Yet he told me he never would have made a profession out of the game if a certain young woman hadn't assured him he had a flair for it.

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When he came to America in 1922, he tried to get a job teaching in philosophy and sociology, but he couldn't.

Then he tried selling coal, and he failed at that.

Then he tried selling coffee, and he failed at that, too.

He had played some bridge, but it had never occurred to him in those days that someday he would teach it. He was not only a poor card player, but he was also very stubborn. He asked so many questions and held so many post-mortem examinations that no one wanted to play with him.

Then he met a pretty bridge teacher, Josephine Dillon, fell in love and married her. She noticed how carefully he analyzed his cards and persuaded him that he was a potential genius at the card table. It was that encouragement and that alone, Culbertson told me, that caused him to make a profession of bridge.

Clarence M. Jones, one of the instructors of our course in Cincinnati, Ohio, told how encouragement and making faults seem easy to correct completely changed the life of his son.

"In 1970 my son David, who was then fifteen years old, came to live with me in Cincinnati. He had led a rough life. In 1958 his head was cut open in a car accident, leaving a very bad scar on his forehead. In 1960 his mother and I were divorced and he moved to Dallas, Texas, with his mother. Until he was fifteen he had spent most of his school years in special classes for slow learners in the Dallas school system. Possibly because of the scar, school administrators had decided he was brain-injured and could not function at a normal level. He was two years behind his age group, so he was only in the seventh grade. Yet he did not know his multiplication tables, added on his fingers and could barely read.

"There was one positive point. He loved to work on radio and TV sets. He wanted to become a TV technician. I encouraged this and pointed out that he needed math to qualify for the training. I decided to help him become proficient in this subject. We obtained four sets of flash cards: multiplication, division, addition

and subtraction. As we went through the cards, we put the correct answers in a discard stack. When David missed one, I gave him the correct answer and then put the card in the repeat stack until there were no cards left. I made a big deal out of each card he got right, particularly if he had missed it previously. Each night we would go through the repeat stack until there were no cards left. Each night we timed the exercise with a stop watch. I promised him that when he could get all the cards correct in eight minutes with no incorrect answers, we would quit doing it every night. This seemed an impossible goal to David. The first night it took 52 minutes, the second night, 48, then 45, 44, 41, then under 40 minutes. We celebrated each reduction. I'd call in my wife, and we would both hug him and we'd all dance a jig. At the end of the month he was doing all the cards perfectly in less than eight minutes. When he made a small improvement he would ask to do it again. He had made the fantastic discovery that learning was easy and fun.

"Naturally his grades in algebra took a jump. It is amazing how much easier algebra is when you can multiply. He astonished himself by bringing home a B in math. That had never happened before. Other changes came with almost unbelievable rapidity. His reading improved rapidly, and he began to use his natural talents in drawing. Later in the school year his science teacher assigned him to develop an exhibit. He chose to develop a highly complex series of models to demonstrate the effect of levers. It required skill not only in drawing and model making but in applied mathematics. The exhibit took first prize in his school's science fair and was entered in the city competition and won third prize for the entire city of Cincinnati.

"That did it. Here was a kid who had flunked two grades, who had been told he was 'brain-damaged,' who had been called 'Frankenstein' by his classmates and told his brains must have leaked out of the cut on his head. Suddenly he discovered he could really learn and accomplish things. The result? From the last quarter of the eighth grade all the way through high school,

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he never failed to make the honor roll; in high school he was elected to the national honor society. Once he found learning was easy, his whole life changed.”

If you want to help others to improve, remember . . .

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PRINCIPLE 8

Use encouragement. Make the fault seem easy to correct.

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